DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 149 PS 030 955

AUTHOR	Lynch, Sharon A.; Warner, Laverne
TITLE	Solving Challenging Behaviors: A Multifaceted Approach Designed to Help Children Learn To Manage Themselves.
PUB DATE	2002-11-00
NOTE	19p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Behavior Change; *Behavior Problems; *Change Strategies; Child Behavior; *Classroom Techniques; Discipline; Elementary School Students; *Preschool Children; Prevention; Problem Children; Self Control; *Student Behavior; *Young Children

ABSTRACT

Asserting that young children often demonstrate challenging behaviors for any number of reasons, this paper presents strategies designed to prevent problem behaviors in young children. Basic principles for establishing a community of learners are discussed. Strategies for teaching children to negotiate, problem solve, and understand the viewpoints of others also are included. The paper also presents a number of research-based techniques designed to prevent negative behavior in children with persistent behavior problems. Behavioral analysis of the setting, events, behaviors, and consequences is explained. Specific techniques to pre-empt problem behaviors are then presented: the Premack Principle, high-probability request sequences, delay cues, and the use of paired distracters. Next, teaching alternative replacement behaviors for negative behaviors is discussed. Finally, the article emphasizes the importance of family involvement when helping young children to improve behavior. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/EV)

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Running Head: CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

ED 473 149

Solving Challenging Behaviors:

A Multifaceted Approach Designed to Help Children Learn to Manage Themselves

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Abstract

Young children often demonstrate challenging behaviors for any number of reasons. This article presents strategies designed to prevent problem behaviors in young children. Basic principles for establishing a community of learners are discussed. Strategies for teaching children to negotiate, problem solve, and understand the viewpoints of others also are included. Environmental arrangements to promote appropriate behavior are emphasized. This article presents a number of research-based techniques designed to prevent negative behavior for children with persistent behavior problems. Behavioral analysis of the setting events, behaviors, and consequences is explained. Specific techniques to pre-empt problem behaviors are presented: the Premack Principle, high-probability request sequences, delay cues, and the use of paired distracters. Teaching alternative replacement behaviors for negative behaviors is discussed. Finally, this article emphasizes the importance of family involvement when helping young children to improve behavior.

Young children may present challenging behaviors in the classroom for any number of reasons (Feil, Walker, Severson, & Ball, 2000; Kuperschmidt, Bryant, & Willoughby, 2000). Some lack elaborated verbal communication needed to express themselves. Frequently, young children have not experienced group situations and are accustomed to having their need met immediately. Crowded settings may result in some children becoming aggressive with each other and other children becoming withdrawn (Zirpoli, 1995; Greenman, 1988). Young children may not have developed the ability to decenter and understand the viewpoints of others. Health factors (illness, chronic conditions) and physical needs (hunger, sleepiness) also can contribute to behavioral difficulties. For these and many other reasons, caregivers must deal with problem behavior in young children.

Caregivers are in a unique position to assist young children in learning appropriate social behaviors, and in controlling aggression and other antisocial behavior (Walker, Severson, & Feil, 1995). If serious behavior problems are not addressed early, long-lasting conduct problems may result. According to Walker (2002), "Children do not grow out of behavior problems—they grow into them." Also, appropriate social behaviors are positively correlated with academic performance and teachers' positive perceptions of students (Zirpoli & Melloy, 2001; Zirpoli & Bell, 1987).

Building a Caring Community of Learners

Assist Children in Understanding the Goals of Democratic Living

We live in a democratic society where citizens are free to make a virtually infinite number of choices on a daily basis. Children need to learn to make decisions and choices so that they can live in a democracy without hurting others in their environment. The young child needs to learn many skills and concepts that will help her to become a contributing member of society.

and feeling of others, to work with a group, to delay gratification, and to honor the decisions of the group. Some of the ways that teachers can promote democratic living within the classroom include:

- providing choices whenever possible
- providing opportunities for group decision-making
- discussing with children the importance of getting along with one another
- providing classroom jobs which are rotated among students
- conducting discussions about keeping the classroom clean and healthy
- discussing each child's responsibilities to the overall classroom community
- holding classroom votes upon occasion
- planning and constructing a class flag or logo

Teachers of young children have the power to teach their children about the principles of democratic living the preschool and primary school setting. When children learn about these principles early in their schooling, they are better able to become contributing members to the classroom and society (Reynolds, 2001).

Introduce the Problem Solving Approach

Often it is tempting for caregivers to intervene directly and tell children exactly what they need to do. Unfortunately, this does not teach children how to solve their own problems in the absence of the adult. Our goal is for children to learn to live productive and fulfilling lives as part of the larger society, both now and in the future. Teaching children how to go about solving their own problems instead of telling them what they need to do helps children learn to manage themselves (Hune & Nelson, 2002). One structure for problem solving involves the following steps:

- Name the problem
- Talk about the problem
- Talk about solutions
- Agree on one solution
- Try out the solution
- Ask if the solution works

For example, when we see two children arguing over who is going to be the mother in the homemaking center and we know that the argument will likely escalate, we can use these six steps to help the children to develop an effective solution. When caregivers encourage children to problem solve the situation, they are providing them with the tools that they need to manage their life situations. On the other hand, when children are punished with negative consequences such as time-out or the "thinking chair," they have not learned what they need to do in order to avoid such problems in the future. When negative consequences are used without instruction and problem solving, the child has not learned any alternatives. Problem solving teaches the child what to do in the future.

Teach Children to Negotiate

Often young children want the same toy or activity, but the toy or activity does not allow several children to participate at the same time. This may result in tears or aggressive behavior. We need to teach children how to ask for what they want, and how to share and take turns. This requires that all children learn how to express their needs and how to respond to others. Teachers can model these behaviors, explain these concepts, prompt them in the context of daily activities, and affirm children when they do these things. Children also need to learn that they may not get exactly what they want immediately, but by asking and waiting, they will get their turn. On the

other hand, the child who shares and takes turns needs affirmation for these appropriate social interactions.

Help Children to Understand Others' Points of View

Young children are developmentally egocentric and may not be aware of the feelings of others. The sensitive teacher discusses the feelings of others throughout the day in a variety of ways: talking about her own feelings, the feelings of the children when various events occur, and the feelings of characters in books during group story reading. For example, when Damian knocks over Jamie's block structure, she comforts Jamie. Then she tells Damian, "You knocked over Jamie's blocks and he had been working hard on them for a long time. How do you think Jamie feels when you knock over his blocks?" Sometimes children may need help in expressing their feelings because they lack the words that they need at the moment. The teacher can describe the child's feelings as she observes them and help her to learn the vocabulary to express herself. As caring, sensitive teachers, we need to use all available opportunities to help children to develop awareness of the feelings within themselves and others.

Environmental Setting

Social Density

Too many children in too small a space can result in some children becoming aggressive and others becoming withdrawn (Greenman, 1988). When children are crowded, teachers can expect more fighting and competition for toys and activities. Even when there is a large room, children should be broken down into smaller groups to allow for individual space and supervision. Children, like adults, may feel stressed when they are in crowded settings (Zirpoli, 1995).

Room Arrangement

The way that space is arranged in the classroom can influence the behavior of the children. For example, large open spaces promote running and are ideal outdoor environments. On the other hand, caregivers need to limit open spaces in the classroom environment. Quiet areas need to be separated from active, noisy areas. Physical boundaries that separate activities and centers promote appropriate play and decrease undesirable behavior (Zirpoli, 1995). Through the use of learning centers such as those for block construction, reading, homemaking activities, dramatic play, music, and art, children learn the appropriate behavior for the specific place. Labeling the activity areas promotes organization and children learn where toys and other objects belong in the classroom. Additionally, labeling areas exposes children to environmental print which sets a foundational familiarity with print that will be used later in reading.

Persistent Behavior Problems

Analyzing the Problem Behavior

When children have persistent behavior problems, an individual approach is needed to analyze and intervene with the challenging behavior (O'Neill et al., 1997). To analyze the problem behavior the caregiver conducts an "ABC Analysis" in which the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences are determined. The first step in this procedure is to describe the behavior in objective terms. Rather than saying that the child is aggressive, we would instead specifically describe the behavior: the child hits peers. The behavior must be stated in clear, measurable terms that pass the "stranger test." To pass the stranger test, the behavior must be accurately described so that a stranger would be able to recognize the behavior when she sees it.

The next step is to determine the antecedents or triggers that precede the behavior. What happens directly before the behavior takes place? Does another child approach the problem child

before he hits them? Does the child with the problem behavior see another child with a toy that he wants prior to hitting her? What time of day is the problem behavior likely to occur? Where is the problem behavior likely to occur? When caregivers can answer these questions, they are better able to understand and pre-empt the behavior before it occurs.

Another part of the ABC analysis is to understand the setting events that are associated with the problem behavior. Setting events are occurrences that do not precede the behavior directly, but happen some time before and increase the probability of behavior problems. Examples of setting events are lack of sleep, a change in routine, parental arguments, a weekend with the non-custodial parent, or an argument with the parent about eating breakfast. When the child experiences a disappointment at school or is told "no," problem behavior may occur when a negative setting event such as these happened prior to coming to school.

The consequences are the events that occur after the problem behavior. Often adults and caregivers understand consequences only from their own points of view. The teacher may understand that she placed Thomas in the "thinking chair" as the consequence for poking classmates during circle time. From the adult's point of view this consequence was a disciplinary measure. Consequences, however, are better understood from the child's point of view. If Thomas dislikes sitting in the circle and does not have the ability to sit more than five minutes, then going to the thinking chair may actually be a reward for this child since he did not want to be in the circle anyway.

Understanding the "pay-off" for the child is extremely important in determining the intervention. Challenging behaviors typically occur for the child to gain something or to avoid something (attention, objects, activities, or sensory stimulation) (O'Neill et al., 1997). Behavior problems in young children commonly occur to get attention from teachers and peers, to get toys,

or sometimes even to gain control of the situation. Situations where young children misbehave to avoid something more commonly occur when they want to avoid clean-up time or tasks that exceed their developmental capabilities. Young children who are developmentally delayed may experience behavior problems when the task is too advanced or not interesting to them. The process of conducting an ABC Analysis is presented in Figure 1.

Preventive Strategies

A common preventive strategy is "Grandma's Rule" or the Premack Principle (Zirpoli & Melloy, 2001). The child is told what will follow after he completes a request. In this way, a high-preference activity serves as a natural reward for a low-preference activity. For example, the teacher tells Roderick that they will go outside after he picks up the blocks. In another instance the teacher tells that class that they will go to lunch when everyone is standing quietly in line. Teachers can use this principle effectively when they plan their daily schedule, providing active times after quiet times or tasks requiring self-control and concentration.

Another way to prevent behavior problems is to use delay cues (Reichle & McEvoy, 2002). When the teacher sees that the child is just beginning to get tired or frustrated, she provides a delay cue such as "We are almost finished." For example, Jeremy usually is tired of sitting in the learning circle after about five minutes. The teacher watches Jeremy and observes his body language for signs that he is near his limit for sitting in the circle. When she sees that he is near his limit, she tells him, "Just one minute and then you can play in centers." In this way she is helping Jeremy to develop self-control and time on task. This approach is certainly preferable to sending Jeremy to time-out for not sitting in circle when he did not want to be there anyway.

Pairing preferred and non-preferred activities is an additional way to prevent problem behavior (Reichle & McEvoy, 2002). For example, many children have trouble waiting in line. When the teacher engages the group in singing or finger plays, this makes waiting in line a much more pleasant experience. If children have difficulty sitting in the learning circle, sometimes holding a small stuffed toy or book makes the experience easier for the child.

Choice making is a way to avoid behavior problems as well (Dulap et al., 1994). Some children have problem behavior when they are requested to do something by an adult. When the adult offers a choice, then the child gains a sense of control and negative behavior may be avoided. Adults should offer only a few choices, however. When young children are given too many choices, they may become confused. Examples of effective choices are, "Do you want to take your nap on the cot or the rug?" or, "Do you want to sit in the chair or on the mat?"

When teachers are able to predict which requests that they make are likely to result in problem behavior, they can use "priming" or a high-probability request sequence to avoid misbehavior (Davis, Brady, Hamilton, McEvoy, & Williams,1994; Mace et al., 1988). For example, Ms. Jones knows that when she asks Jasmine to put the dolls away, she is likely to throw a temper tantrum. Rather than directly asking her to put the dolls away, she first asks Jasmine to feed the baby, pat the baby, and then kiss the baby. After these three easy requests, she then asks Jasmine to put the baby away. Before she asks Luis to come to the circle, she gives three simple requests: show me your hair, show me your nose, show me your shirt. Then the teacher says, "Let's go to circle time." Luis is much more likely to follow the teacher's request to go to the learning circle after the three simple requests. Priming consists of giving three easy requests before giving a difficult request that is likely to trigger negative behavior.

For the child who demonstrates problem behavior to gain attention, the teacher can provide plenty of high quality attention when the child is behaving appropriately (Jones, Drew, & Weber, 2002; Hanley, Piazza & Fisher, 1997). This decreases the child's likelihood of using negative behavior to get her need for attention met. Other children who may need peer attention benefit from opportunities to play and interact with peers who have strong social skills. The teacher may need to prompt, structure, and supervise activities in order for the child to have a positive play experience. These preventive strategies are summarized in Figure 2.

Teach Alternative Behaviors

When children demonstrate negative behaviors, another way of dealing with the behavior is to determine what alternative behavior can be taught that meets the child's needs (O'Neil et al., 1997). Before beginning this procedure, the teacher needs a clear understanding of the pay-off of the behavior. When the teacher has a sound idea of the purpose of the behavior, then she needs to determine a "fair pair" behavior. This is a behavior that serves the same purpose as the problem behavior, but is instead an adaptive behavior. For example if the child throws a tantrum when he wants something, he needs to learn to use his words instead. The teacher would target asking for desired items as the fair pair behavior to be taught. If the child is nonverbal, she can be taught to sign the names of commonly desired objects. Sometimes it is easier to teach a generalized request such as the sign for "please."

Teach Social Skills

Not all children have learned appropriate social skills incidentally from their environment. Other children have seen more negative models of social skills in their neighborhoods and on television, and they have not learned appropriate social behaviors. For young children, the social skill should be broken down into three or fewer steps. For example,

when we are angry, we need to (1) cross our arms, (2) take a deep breath, and (3) say, "control." After determining the three steps, the teacher models the behavior and has the student model the behavior as well. Then the teacher asks the child to show a friend what we do when we are angry. The teacher and child practice the social skill, and the teacher prompts the child to use the skill when needed during the day. Skills such as anger control should be taught when the child is calm and not angry; angry children do not learn easily. Then when the skill is needed the teacher prompts it and affirms the child for "getting control."

Parent Involvement

When the family and teacher work together to help the child with behavioral issues, generalization comes much more easily (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). The child is more likely to use the skill outside the classroom when the parents and teachers are consistent in their approach. However, caregivers should avoid placing blame on parents when they do not become involved with the child's program to the extent that schools expect. Also, schools should never use the family's lack of involvement as an excuse not to help the child improve his behavior. Unfortunately, some caregivers may say, "Until the parents do something about her behavior I might as well not even try." This position will not help the teacher, the child, or the family. Families often consider the teacher the expert and will assist the child once the teacher has had success and can show them clearly show them how to help the child. Other families are eager to help the child with her behavior, but need a simple, direct explanation of what they can do.

Conclusion

Teachers and caregivers who work with young children are in a unique position to promote a foundation of appropriate social behavior that will help children as they develop and mature. This can be done through helping children to problem solve, negotiate, understand

others' viewpoints, and work within a community of learners. Additionally, the classroom environment can be designed to promote appropriate social behavior and discourage negative interactions. When children experience ongoing problems, their behavior should be analyzed so that an effective intervention can be developed. Finally, when the family members are involved in the process, the children are better able to use the skills that they learn in their homes, schools, and communities. When teachers of young children assume leadership roles in working with children with behavior problems, they are making a difference by helping these children with skills that are important throughout their lives.

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Figure 1. ABC analysis and intervention

Setting Event	Antecedents	Behavior	Consequence
What events took place in the home or community preceding the behavior? Did the child experience any disappointment or negative event prior to the behavior? Were there negative events that occurred during the ride to school? Does the child have a health problem that preceded the negative behavior?	**Current** What happened in the classroom immediately prior to the negative behavior? What tasks was the child involved in prior to the behavior? What peers and adults were with the child prior to the negative behavior? When and where did the behavior occur?	What did the child do? What did the behavior look like? Describe the behavior in clear, measurable terms.	What happened immediately following the negative behavior? What is the pay-off for the child? What does the child gain when he performs the behavior? What does the child avoid when she performs the behavior? What is the function of the behavior?
What can you as a caregiver do to assist the parent in changing home conditions that precede the behavior? What methods can be used to increase communication with the parents? What can be done to improve the ride to school? What can be done to improve health factors?	**Intervention** What can be changed in the classroom or other school environment to prevent the behavior? What can be done to make the tasks developmentally appropriate for the child? How can tasks be made more interesting?	What can you teach the child to do instead of the problem behavior? What behavior can replace the negative behavior that has the same function or pay-off? What replacement behavior can you teach the child?	What can you do to make the current negative behavior ineffective and invalid? What can you do to ensure that the child uses appropriate behavior instead? How can you prompt and encourage newly learned replacement behavior?

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Figure 2. Preventive strategies

Strategy	Principle	Example
Grandma's Rule	A high preference behavior serves as a reward for a low preference behavior.	The teacher tells the class, "When you have cleaned up the centers, then we will go to the playground."
Paired Activity	A low preference activity is enhanced in value when accompanied by a high-preference activity.	The teacher leads her class in their favorite finger plays while they wait in line to have their pictures made.
Choice Making	When children are asked to engage in a low-preference activity, they are less likely to misbehave if they are given a choice of activities or contexts.	The teacher asks Garth, "Would you like to take your nap on the cot or on the mat?"
Priming	Children are better able to carry out a difficult request after they have carried out three easy requests.	The teacher says to Maddie, "Show me your shirt. Show me your shoes. Touch your tummy. Hand me the doll."
Delay Cue	Children are less likely to misbehave during a low preference activity when they know that it is almost finished.	Just as Collin begins to show signs of restlessness during circle time, his teacher says, "Just one minute and then we will be finished."

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